

CPYRGHT

Letters to the Editor

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I can see no reason for withholding their names. The "reverend head of an Oxford college" was the very Rev. Lancelot Ridley Phelps, Provost of Oriel, under whom I had the privilege to sit for the last two years of his tenure. The other party to the affair was Ernest Edward Jenner, who had been imported by the Provost in 1927 in a laudable (and successful) effort to improve the classical knowledge of those of us who were reading Honour Moderations. The point of the story as related by Mr. John Betjeman is largely lost if one does not recognise the two personalities involved. Jenner was not a guest at High Table but a classical tutor of the college, and his views in the matter of indulgence in drink and tobacco were very well known to the Provost, who took occasion to tease him about them from time to time. The story also loses yet more of its pith if from it is omitted the Provost's habit of triplicating his utterances. The incident is reputed to have occurred over coffee in the Provost's lodgings, and the actual dialogue, as credibly reported at the time, went as follows:

Provost: Mr Jenner, Sir, may I press you to a glass of port, a glass of port, a glass of port?

Jenner: Mr Provost, on no account. Sir, I would rather commit adultery.
Provost: My dear Sir, who wouldn't, I mean to say, who wouldn't, who wouldn't?

The whole incident was enshrined in memorable Homeric hexameters by the present Camden Professor of Ancient History in the University of Oxford, whose lines were circulated, like Shakespeare's sonnets, to his private friends. I regret that the passage of nearly thirty years has left only two words of them in my mind, but they are perhaps worth recording, for those who knew and revered the Provost—*κερδαλεὸν φελψ*.—
Yours faithfully, DENIS O'NEILL
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Who wouldn't?

SIR—Before the mists of legend distort beyond recognition one of the best stories of my day at Oxford, may I seek space in your columns to correct and amplify Mr Betjeman's version of it as quoted in your review of "The Compleat Imbiber" on December 15th?

As both the principals are now dead,